

# SOCIO-PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS AND EMIGRATION PLANS AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN SLOVAKIA DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Frederika Lučanská<sup>1</sup>, & Oľga Orosová<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Department of Psychology, Faculty of Arts, PJ Safarik University in Kosice (Slovakia)*

<sup>2</sup>*Department of Educational Psychology and Psychology of Health, Faculty of Arts, PJ Safarik University in Kosice (Slovakia)*

## Abstract

**Objective:** The objective of this study was to examine the relationship between socio-psychological factors such as the perceived economic situation, perceived political situation, well-being, rootedness and emigration plans of university students in Slovakia during the Covid-19 pandemic.

**Methods:** The data for this study were collected through an online survey of university students during the Covid-19 pandemic between November and December 2021. The research sample consisted of 151 (76.2% female) Slovak university students (M=21.8 years, SD=2.5). In order to identify emigration plans, there was one question with 8 answer options. Based on this, the respondents were divided into two groups; those who do not plan to leave Slovakia (76.8%) and those who plan to leave in the long term (23.2%). There was also one item used to measure the perceived economic situation and political situation. The satisfaction with life scale was used to measure well-being while the Rootedness scale consisting of the Desire for Change and Home/Family subscales was used to measure rootedness. As emigration plans was a categorical variable, binary logistic regression was used. The analysis was controlled for gender.

**Results:** A model containing five independent variables (perceived economic situation, perceived political situation, well-being, rootedness - desire for change and home/family dimensions) explained 41.9% of variance in emigration plans during the Covid-19 pandemic, and correctly classified 84.8% of the cases. Only three of these variables made a unique statistically significant contribution to the model. The strongest predictor of emigration plans during the Covid-19 pandemic was perceived economic situation, recording an OR of 2.27. This indicated that students who perceived the economic situation in Slovakia more pessimistically were over 2 times more likely to report an emigration plan. The OR of 1.32 for rootedness – desire for change, indicated that students with a greater desire for change were over 1.32 times more likely to report emigration plans. On the contrary, the OR of 0.81 for rootedness – home/family was less than 1, indicating that students who were more satisfied with their home and family were 0.81 times less likely to report emigration plans.

**Conclusion:** The strongest predictor of emigration plans during a pandemic is perceived economic situation. The dimensions of rootedness, as confirmed by previous studies, are predictors of emigration plans in the pre-pandemic and pandemic period.

**Keywords:** *Emigration plans, Covid-19 pandemic, university students, socio-psychological factors.*

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## 1. Introduction

It is international migration that is according to Bargerová (2016) considered to be one of the fundamental civilization challenges of the 21st century with its serious economic, social, political and other impacts. Yet it plays a key role in the development of a society (Bargerová, 2016). Therefore, migration can be generally seen as a neutral phenomenon having both positive or negative effects for different countries such as brain gain or brain drain. Slovakia is one of the countries which experience a significant brain drain due to shortages of workforce in the labor market in all sectors since 2016 caused by the outflow of qualified workers (Grenčíková, Skačkauskienė & Španková, 2018). Slovakia was always known as a country of migrants, but according to Machlica, Toman, Haluš and Martinák (2017), emigration from Slovakia has intensified since our country joined the EU. The largest group of emigrants are young and educated people. The statistics from Káčerová and Horváthová (2014) show that about 53.68% people from those that left Slovakia in 2011 had a secondary education and 21.55% university

education. Similar results have been reported by Lučanská et al. (2020), who found that up to 45.4 % of students plan to leave Slovakia for a long period of time after they finish university.

However, currently the world is facing a much bigger problem, known as Covid-19 pandemic declared on March 11, 2020 by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2020). Although, WHO (2020) recognizes the Covid-19 pandemic primarily as a public health crisis, it also admits that this crisis affects every sector. The same view on this topic was presented by Boucher (2020) who stated that the spread of this disease to the world caused a series of different shocks. One of these shocks is caused by restrictions regarding traveling as a result of various measures aimed at slowing down and preventing the spread of this disease. Therefore, Covid-19 pandemic is not only a health crisis, but what is for this study more important, it is a migration crisis as well (Boucher, 2020). We consider it important to address the issue of the factors related to emigration behavior, which have been widely studied and empirically tested in connection with emigration intentions or plans in recent years. Thus, we select following socio-psychological factors to re-examine them in the current situation of the Covid-19 pandemic. According to our knowledge, there are only few studies which have addressed this topic so far. However, none of them has studied the socio-psychological factors adapted by in this study.

One of the issues that young people are focusing on while they are considering emigration is economic situation in the country. This has been documented among youth in Slovakia (Youth Council of Slovakia [RMS], 2016). Within the V-cycle of Structured dialogue many of them have said that they felt as if they were only "surviving" but not actually living, because of the economic situation, lack of opportunities to get a job, especially a decent one. This issue was also examined by other authors (e.g. Orosová, Gajdošová, Kulanová & Berinšterová, 2017; Traikova, Möllers & Petrick, 2018), who emphasize its importance in relation to future emigration behavior. For example, Orosová et al. (2017) have found that a higher level of negative evaluation of economic situation is associated with the emigration intentions of students in Slovakia. Another important result of the Structured dialogue was finding that young people in Slovakia don't have much faith in their future successful life. This was particularly linked to their perspective on the political situation in the country. Therefore, a permanent stay abroad was often reported (RMS, 2016). Another important predictor of emigration behavior is well-being. The findings in this area are so far contradictory. While some authors claim that lower well-being leads to emigration behavior (e.g. Cai, Esipova, Oppenheimer & Feng, 2014; Hajduch, Orosová & Kulanová, 2018), others claim the opposite that it is the higher well-being which leads to emigration behavior (e.g. Polgreen & Simpson, 2011; Ivlevs, 2014). However, there is a consensus that well-being is a factor which plays a role in migration. This issue was further examined by Lučanská et al. (2020) who has found that regarding the emigration plans of Slovak university students, surprisingly, rootedness plays a more important role than well-being. This was shown by the analysis of the relationship between well-being and emigration plans which was fully mediated by rootedness (both dimensions). More precisely, the first dimension represented by a high desire for change was found to boost emigration plans regardless of low well-being. On the other hand, high satisfaction with home and family was found to weaken emigration plans regardless of high well-being (Lučanská et al., 2020). This kind of role of rootedness as one of the emigration factors was confirmed to play a role by other authors as well (e.g. Cooke, 2011; Hricová, Janovská, Orosová & Kulanová, 2017).

## 2. Objectives

The objective of this study was to examine the relationship between emigration plans of university students in Slovakia during the Covid-19 pandemic and socio-psychological factors such as the perceived economic situation, perceived political situation, well-being and rootedness.

## 3. Methods

### 3.1. Sample and procedure

The data for this study were collected through an online survey focusing on the emigration behavior of university students as well as various aspects of their lives during the Covid-19 pandemic. The survey was conducted between November and December 2021. The research sample consisted of 151 Slovak university students ( $M=21.8$  years,  $SD = 2.5$ ). The majority of the sample (76.2%) were females.

### 3.2. Measures

The respondents were asked to complete an online questionnaire, voluntarily and anonymously. To identify emigration plans and socio-psychological factors, the following measures were used:

- **Emigration plans** – were identified by a single question: "Given the Covid-19 pandemic, do you plan to leave Slovakia after you finish university?" with 8 possible answers: (1) No, I am not

planning to leave; (2) I do not know, I have not thought about it; (3) I do not know, I have not decided yet; (4) I am planning to go abroad for 6 months; (5) I am planning to go abroad for 6 to 12 months; (6) I am planning to leave for more than a year; (7) I am planning to leave for more than 5 years; (8) I am planning to leave permanently. Based on the answer, the respondents can be divided into different groups. For the purpose of this study, they were divided into two groups: (a) those who do not plan to leave Slovakia (answer 1); (b) those who plan to leave Slovakia in the long term (answer 6, 7 or 8) even in time of Covid-19 pandemic.

- **Perceived economic situation** – was assessed by a single item question: “What do you think about the development of economy in Slovakia over the next 10 years in context of your professional career and perspective a starting your own family?” The respondents answered on a four-point Likert scale ranging from 1 – very optimistic to 4 – very pessimistic. The score ranges from 1 to 4 points, while a higher score indicates a more pessimistic perception of the economic situation in Slovakia.

- **Perceived political situation** – was assessed by a single item question: “If you should evaluate the political situation in Slovakia in comparison with other EU countries, how would you see it?” The respondents answered on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 – much better to 7 – much worse. The score ranges from 1 to 7 points, while a higher score indicates a more pessimistic perception of the political situation in Slovakia.

- **Well-being** – was addressed using the construct of subjective well-being (Diener, Emmons, Larsen & Griffin, 1985; Džuka & Dalbert, 2002). The respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed with 5 statements, while taking into account the covid-19 pandemic (e.g. “In most ways my life is close to my ideal.”) on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 – strongly disagree to 5 – strongly agree. The score ranges from 5 to 25 points with a higher score indicating a higher level of well-being. Cronbach’s alpha for well-being was 0.879.

- **Rootedness** – was measured using the McAndrew Rootedness scale (1998) which consists of 2 dimensions (“Desire for change” subscale and “Home/Family” subscale). The respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed with statements for each subscale on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 – strongly disagree to 5 – strongly agree. There were 6 statements for “Desire for change” subscale (e.g. “Moving from place to place is exciting and fun.”) and 4 statements for “Home/Family” subscale (e.g. “I am extremely satisfied with my present home.”). The score for “Desire for change” subscale ranges from 6 to 30 points; a higher score indicates a higher level of a respondent’s desire to change their living environment. Cronbach’s alpha for this subscale was 0.573. The score for the “Home/Family” subscale ranges from 4 to 20 points; a higher score indicates a higher level of a respondent’s attachment to their family and home. Cronbach’s alpha for this subscale was 0.556.

### 3.3. Statistical analyses

Due to the categorical nature of the dependent variable, a binary logistic regression in SPSS 25 was used in order to identify the strength of the model and socio-psychological factors related to students’ emigration plans during the Covid-19 pandemic. The analysis was controlled for gender.

## 4. Results

First, the emigration plans among university students in Slovakia during the Covid-19 pandemic was examined. Based on this the respondents were divided into two groups: those who do not plan to leave Slovakia and those who plan to leave Slovakia in the long term even in time of Covid-19 pandemic. As shown in Table 1, up to 76.8% of students in Slovakia (77.4% female, 75.0% male) do not plan to leave Slovakia after they finish university and up to 23.2% of students (22.6% female, 25.0% male) plan to leave in long term. A Chi-square test of independence (with Yates Continuity Correction) indicated no significant association between gender and emigration plans,  $\chi^2(1, n=151) = .005, p = .944, \phi = 0.024$ .

*Table 1. Emigration plans among university students in Slovakia during the Covid-19 pandemic.*

Emigration plan	Among sample (n=151)	Among females (n=115)	Among men (n=36)
Not planning to leave Slovakia	116 (76.8 %)	89 (77.4 %)	27 (75.0 %)
Planning to leave Slovakia in the long-term	35 (23.2 %)	26 (22.6 %)	9 (25.0 %)

The descriptive statistics of the explored variables regarding to emigration plans during the Covid-19 pandemic are shown in Table 2. In general, those who do not plan to leave Slovakia scored lower in perceived economic and political situation, desire for change and higher in home/family rootedness as compared to those who plan to leave in the long term even in time of Covid-19 pandemic.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of the sample in the explored variables according to emigration.

Variable	Theoretical range	Not planning to leave	Planning to leave in the long-term	T-test value
Perceived economic situation	1 – 4	M = 2.55 (SD = 0.66)	M = 3.11 (SD = 0.68)	- 4.375***
Perceived political situation	1 – 7	M = 5.67 (SD = 0.97)	M = 6.23 (SD = 0.69)	- 3.780***
Well-being	5 – 25	M = 14.43 (SD = 5.14)	M = 13.09 (SD = 5.11)	1.359
Rootedness – Desire for change	6 – 30	M = 17.65 (SD = 4.06)	M = 21.97 (SD = 3.82)	- 5.602***
Rootedness – Home/Family	4 – 20	M = 16.52 (SD = 2.45)	M = 14.40 (SD = 3.13)	3.679***

M – Mean; SD – Standard deviation; \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

Second, logistic regression was performed to assess the impact of a number of socio-psychological factors on the likelihood that respondents would report that they plan to leave Slovakia after they finish university even in time of Covid-19 pandemic. The model as a whole was statistically significant,  $\chi^2(6, n = 151) = 49.03$ ,  $p < .001$  and explained 41.9 % of the variance in emigration plans during the Covid-19 pandemic. Model correctly classified 84.8% of the cases. As shown in Table 3, only three of five examined independent variables made a unique statistically significant contribution to the model (perceived economic situation, desire for change and home/family rootedness). The strongest predictor of emigration plans during the Covid-19 pandemic was perceived economic situation, recording an OR of 2.27. This indicated that students who perceived the economic situation in Slovakia more pessimistically were more than 2-times more likely to report having a plan to leave Slovakia after they finish university even in time of Covid-19 pandemic. The OR of 1.32 for rootedness – desire for change, indicated that students with a greater desire for change were more than 1.32 times more likely to report a plan to leave Slovakia. On the contrary, the OR of 0.81 for rootedness – home/family was less than 1, indicating that students who were more satisfied with their home and family were less likely to report emigration plans.

Table 3. Logistic regression predicting likelihood of reporting emigration plans.

Regression model ( $R^2 = 0.419$ )								
Predictors	B	S. E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B) (OR)	95 % C. I for Exp(B)	
							Lower	Upper
Gender*	0.171	0.578	0.087	1	0.767	1.186	0.382	3.679
Perceived economic situation	0.819	0.389	4.431	1	0.035	2.267	1.058	4.858
Perceived political situation	0.380	0.302	1.586	1	0.208	1.462	0.810	2.640
Well-being	0.063	0.051	1.561	1	0.212	1.065	0.965	1.176
Rootedness – Home/Family	0.279	0.076	13.369	1	<0.001	1.322	1.138	1.536
Rootedness – Desire for change	- 0.214	0.091	5.539	1	0.019	0.808	0.676	0.965

Note: \*female as a reference group; OR – odds ratio; 95% CI – confidence interval (lower and upper threshold)

## 5. Discussion and conclusions

In this study we focused on the relationship between emigration plans of university students in Slovakia during the Covid-19 pandemic and socio-psychological factors (the perceived economic and political situation, well-being and rootedness). Although previous research in this area has confirmed all examined factors as important predictors of emigration behavior in the pre-pandemic period, our results concerning the pandemic period are different. The perceived economic situation and two dimensions of rootedness are predictors of emigration plans not only in the pre-pandemic period but also in the pandemic period. However, the perceived political situation and the well-being proved to be insignificant in relation to emigration plans during the Covid-19 pandemic. This is a change from the pre-pandemic period.

The biggest limitation of this study is a small size sample with a disproportional distribution of gender. It is also important to mention that the sample consisted of Slovak university students only. Future research should extend the sample by including other age groups and countries. The findings of this study may stimulate further research activity in this area since there are only few studies addressing the two important questions: a) What does emigration look like during the Covid-19 pandemic? b) What will emigration look like after the Covid-19 pandemic?

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